

When Faith Fails

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- [0 : 0 0] Last week, we began a new series of messages, and we're looking at the story of Abraham.
- And Abraham is known best for... Anyone? His faith. Yes.
- His faith. And I think because of that, sometimes we can put him up on a bit of a pedestal. We think of him as, wow, Abraham, the man of faith.
- And then we kind of see ourselves as down here, kind of a lower level. You know, should we do that?
- Well, we're going to find out this morning as we continue along with Abraham's story. Perhaps we are more like Abraham than not like him.
- [0 : 5 9] So if you have your Bible with you, please open it up to Genesis chapter 12. Or on your smartphone or however you have it here this morning. Genesis chapter 12.
- We heard last Sunday about how God appeared to Abraham.
- How he told him to go, leave his hometown of Ur and travel all the way to the land he would show him, which was the land of Canaan.
- And he packed up all his possessions. He obeyed the Lord's call and he went in faith, trusting that the Lord would show him, provide for him. He accumulated some possessions, I guess, and servants and things like that along the way.
- And so this morning we find him in Canaan, this land that God has promised to give to him and his descendants. And here he is living in a tent with his wife, who we know from last Sunday is barren.
- [2 : 1 1] She's unable to conceive. And with his nephew Lot and with all their servants. They're living as foreigners here. And this is the land that God said, I will give it to your offspring.
- Quite a promise. So things seem to be going well for Abraham until all of a sudden things take a turn for the worst. Verse 10.
- Now there was a famine in the land. And Abraham went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. Now this is a little bit hard for us to relate to maybe.
- I mean, when we're hungry, when we need more food in the fridge, we go to the co-op. Right over there. We get some groceries. We take them back to the house.
- Not something that we easily relate to. Scarcity of food. It's headlines when there's no tomatoes at the co-op for a whole week.
- [3 : 1 5] I mean, I imagine that at this point, Abraham has probably sold off some of his livestock and his cattle. You know, he's doing the best as he can to keep food on the table for his family.
- And then eventually things get to the point where this is, you know, we got to do something here. And he packs everything up and journeys down to the fertile regions around the Nile to Egypt.

And he decides to live there for a while because of how severe the famine was, this food shortage. So it's here that we find out a little bit more about Abraham.

Verse 11. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, this is his wife.

Then they will kill me, but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake. And my life will be spared because of you.

[4 : 27] So here Abraham is with his family, this whole company of people that's with him. And they're headed down to Egypt. And as they get close to this, which at the time was a great empire, one of the greatest in the ancient world, Abraham looks at his wife.

And then he looks ahead. And he looks back at his wife. And he looks ahead. And fear starts to rise in his heart. He realizes, I'm going to Egypt.

I'm going to the place where the most powerful man in the land, in the region, lives. Pharaoh. Pharaoh. And Abraham's wife, I mean, his logic is very simple here.

He knows that his wife is beautiful. She's a supermodel. They've probably had other men express their interest in her at times.

And, you know, he's kind of thinking, as soon as they see her, they're going to desire her. They'll find out that she's married to me. She's not available.

[5 : 40] And so they're going to kill me. I mean, this is, these guys are powerful. There's nothing I can really do to stop this from happening. And so he comes up with a plan.

Say you are my sister. We won't tell him about, you know, us being husband and wife. And then when we get there, we'll see what happens.

Hopefully nothing bad. But just in case, if I'll be treated well and not killed. And, you know, I'm not sure how Abraham was thinking this was going to end.

You know, was he planning to kind of steal Sarai away in the middle of the night from the palace at some point in case she did get captured? I mean, let's, let's just acknowledge for a minute what kind, and this is, this is, to me, this is a pretty disgusting thing to do to your, to your wife.

I mean, it's kind of self-serving for Abraham. How would you feel, women, if your husband did that to you? You know, say that you're my sister, you know.

[6 : 46] Kind of feel like you, you know, she's being thrown under the bus a little bit here. You know, and what happened, we don't know, like what, what if they treat her poorly? What if they abuse her?

What if they, you know, what about me, Abraham? That's kind of what I'm thinking here. Yeah, this is, this is, and we have to remember, this is ancient times.

I mean, women's rights are not the same back then as they, they are now. But in some senses, there, there are similarities.

I mean, today even we see men who are powerful, wealthy, using their power and wealth to use women and, and to go after them and to satisfy the lusts of their hearts.

Interestingly enough, even way back then, we see almost more respect for the institution of marriage. You know, it's kind of a backwards way of thinking.

[7 : 46] Well, if she's married, we'll have to kill Abraham because marriage is a big deal back then. You know, whereas today, you know, men will just take sexually from you in our culture, in our world, regardless of the commitment that you've made.

And so there's some big differences, but there's also similarities. And Abraham, he does what many of us would do in a situation like this. This seems dangerous.

This seems tricky. I guess we'll just come up with, with a bit of a plan. And this is the outcome we hope to achieve. So, so let's go with that.

Um, I mean, we could be quick to, to, to jump on Abraham and say, what are you doing? Like, how could you treat your wife like that? It's certainly not the way that Jesus, I imagine, would treat his bride.

You know, he would lay down his life to protect her. He would stand up to Pharaoh and say, don't you dare touch her. She's my wife. You know, that's, and so we definitely, I, I look at Abraham and this decision here as a failure, you know, as a, as an act of fear, an act of unbelief, an act of cowardice, not protecting his, his wife who God has given him.

[9 : 04] Um, but how often do we do the same kind of thing? When we're faced with a difficult situation, we're not quite sure how things are going to work out.

Well, let's come up with a plan here. You know, what are the factors? What am I hoping to achieve here? What, let's just figure this out. The only problem with Abraham's plan is that it's missing the most important part.

God's not in it at all. We just heard last Sunday that God had made these, these promises to Abraham. I will bless you.

I will make your name great. I will make you into a great nation. And what's Abraham thinking? Well, as soon as they see you and find out if I tell the truth that I'm your husband, they're going to kill me.

Well, how is the Lord going to make you into a great nation, Abraham, if you're dead and have no offspring? How is he going to make your name great if you're only remembered as, as the guy who had a really beautiful wife and, and was killed?

[10 : 17] How is he going to bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you? If the first sign of trouble, somebody comes, you know, threatens, threatens you.

And like Abraham has lost sight of the promises that God has made to him. God specifically promised, I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you.

I will protect you is the general meaning of that. If somebody comes against you, I will be against them. And Abraham has lost sight of that completely.

He's worried that they're going to kill him. He acts in, at best, forgetfulness of, of God's promise.

Or perhaps if he remembered God's promise, at worst, simply doubts or, or doesn't believe that the Lord will take care of him in this situation.

[11 : 15] And so what happens next? When Abraham comes to Egypt, when Abraham came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh and she was taken into his palace.

He treated Abram well for her sake. And Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants and camels. So Abram was right.

He was right that they would desire his wife. He was right that they would try to take her. And he seems to have got a lot of good stuff given to him.

But we got to wonder how Abram's feeling at the end of all this. I just basically traded my wife for a bunch of animals and some servants. And, you know, now what?

I lost my wife, you know, like my beautiful wife. What's going to happen now? Am I going to see her again? And will we ever... What's going to happen here?

[12 : 21] And an even bigger question. What's going to happen to the promise that the Lord has made here? Because without this marriage, there is no great nation. There is no blessing all the families of the earth through you.

And so it's at this moment that we're kind of looking for the Lord to intervene. But the question that I kept thinking about is, what do we expect the Lord to do here?

I mean, look at what Abraham has done. He's doubted God. He's basically made his decision without regard for the promise that God has given him. He's been a selfish jerk, really, to his wife and basically said, Here, I don't want to die, so here you go.

Nuts to our love, to our marriage. I'm not sure what he's really thinking. He probably wouldn't have admitted all that. So what's God going to do when he intervenes in the story in this next moment?

What are we expecting from him? Well, Abraham, I mean, you kind of got what you deserved. Like, look at what you did.

[13 : 34] Look at what you did to your wife. You didn't trust me. I gave you a promise, and you didn't believe me. So here you go. That's kind of what I expect.

But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife, Sarai.

So Pharaoh summoned Abram. What have you done to me? He said. Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say she is my sister so that I took her to be my wife?

Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go. Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men. And they sent him on his way with his wife and everything he had.

So the Lord does intervene. But maybe not the way that we would have expected. He is against Pharaoh and his household. He afflicts them with a disease.

[14 : 36] And even though Abram is really the one who has blown it here, the Lord allows Abram to essentially go free.

And the sense there is that he also could take all the stuff that he had got from Pharaoh. He plunders the most powerful man in the known region.

And there is no consequence seemingly for what he did to his wife, for the fact that he lied. It is not really what we expected.

At this point, we have to admit, this is a surprising act of mercy on the Lord's part. But we hope that Abraham learns his lesson, right?

That next time he'll trust the Lord. He'll take him at his word. He'll make his plans and decisions with God in view. Does he? Not even close.

[15 : 40] In fact, he does the very same thing again only eight chapters later. In chapter 20, I'm going to read it for you. It's a different person. Now he's moved down into the Negev, the southern regions of the land of Canaan.

And there's a guy there, a local king named Abimelech. It says, For a while he stayed in Gerar, and there Abram said of his wife Sarah, She is my sister.

Then Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent for Sarah and took her. But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken.

She is a married woman. Now Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said, Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? Did he not say to me she is my sister? And didn't she also say he's my brother?

I've done this with a clear conscience and clean hands. Then God said to him in the dream, Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me.

[16 : 45] That is why I did not let you touch her. Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die.

Early the next morning, Abimelech summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham in and said, What have you done to us?

How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done. And Abimelech asked Abraham, What was your reason for doing this?

Abraham replied, I said to myself, There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father, though not of my mother, and she became my wife.

And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, This is how you can show your love to me. Everywhere we go, say of me, He is my brother. Then Abimelech brought sheep, and cattle, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah, his wife, to him.

[17 : 54] And Abimelech said, My land is before you. Live wherever you like. To Sarah he said, I'm giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you.

You are completely vindicated. Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female slaves, so that they could have children again. For the Lord had kept all the women in Abimelech's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife, Sarah.

So here we go around the second time. Abraham does the exact same thing. Powerful man in the land. Say you are my sister. He didn't apparently learn his lesson, and his thinking was the exact same as well.

There's surely no fear of God in this place, and they'll kill me. They're going to kill me. He lost sight of the promises of God. Again, to protect him, to bless him, to make his name great, to make a great nation out of him.

He acted in unbelief. He acted in doubt. And what happens? Same thing as before.

[19 : 11] Abimelech takes his wife. Now he's in a bad situation. And again, the Lord intervenes. He visits Abimelech in a dream.

He tells him he's a dead man. If he doesn't return Sarah to Abraham, Abimelech actually pleads his case with God.

God kind of accepts that plea, but says, you return his wife. Go to Abraham. He'll pray for you. You'll be healed. Abimelech calls Abraham in, goes through the interrogation, just like with Pharaoh.

Why did you do this to me? And the reason is the same. A second time. At the end of this, Abraham walks out of there with kind of a blank check on where he can live in this area, in this kingdom that this king is in charge of, and with a whole bunch of animals and servants, and with a thousand shekels of silver.

I don't know about you, but that's not really the end that I expected to read there. Again, we see God's unexpected mercy and kindness to Abraham.

[20 : 29] I mean, here Abraham blows it. He forgets what God has promised to do for him. He throws his wife under the bus. He blows it with her. He lies, and God blesses him.

He blesses his socks off. He gives them, in fact, he even establishes Abraham as a prophet to Abimelech. I don't know if you notice that, but it's like, you want to be healed, Abimelech?

Well, go to Abraham. He is a prophet. He will pray for you. He humbles this king before this foreigner who lives in the tent over there.

What an unexpected response from the Lord. What an amazing gift of grace, and it's here that we start to see how the Lord intends to keep the promises that he's made to Abraham.

we go back to those promises again, and we have to take a second look. I will make you into a great nation if, no, it doesn't say if.

[21 : 46] I will bless you if. I will make your name great if. No, it doesn't say that. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse if.

We're expecting there to be some kind of a condition there, aren't we? Especially if Abraham goes and does what he does, and he doesn't trust the Lord's promise, and he does this to his wife, and he lies, and all these things.

And all of a sudden, we realize that that's not what the Lord said. His promise was, can be summed up with, I will bless you, Abraham. I will put my special favor upon you.

Period. Period. Doesn't matter if you blow it. If you, if you sin, if you don't hold fast to that promise, I will hold fast to you.

I will bless you. What an amazing, unexpected gift of grace and mercy. What kind of God is this?

[22 : 55] Who makes promises like this and then keeps them even when the people that he's made them to blow it and don't believe them.

The question is, will Abraham learn to trust the Lord's promises? This is twice that he's done this. As more difficulties come into his life, will he learn to take the Lord at his word?

To look at those difficulties and then look up and consider what God has said to him. That he really will honor his word and keep his promises.

And that's really the question that hits us as well. I mean, our stories are different than Abraham's, but we too face difficulties. We face troubles.

Things happen in our lives that were unexpected. Not a famine, but other things. What will we do in those situations?

[24 : 04] Will we do like Abraham and just come up with a plan to make the best of it and hope to get this outcome? Or will we make our plans? Will we make our decisions in full view of what the Lord has said to us?

The promises that he's made. Will we trust him? And if we do, we'll make different decisions. Abraham failed here.

He did. Twice. And we failed too. But we can learn from Abraham's lack of faith in this situation, even though he was the great hero of our faith.

perhaps we're more like him than unlike him. But at the end of this, this story is, it is about faith, and we can learn from Abraham about that, but it's about something even bigger and better than that.

It's about a God who has this incredible, amazing, huge grace and compassion and kindness and mercy to a sinner who didn't deserve it.

[25 : 21] That's the same kindness and compassion and mercy that would later send his own son into the world for sinners like us who don't deserve it.

Abraham didn't do anything to deserve this special favor from God, these promises that were made to him. In the same way, we haven't done anything worthy of God's favor or we could never earn our way into a right standing with God.

God didn't sweep Abraham off the table and say, oh, you blew it. I'll start over with someone else. He intervened. He stepped into the situation. He maintained his promise.

He gave grace and he did the same thing again thousands of years later through his son, Jesus. Even Abimelech has something to teach us in this story about the grace of God.

Abraham was the chosen one. He's the one that was going to get God's special favor and blessing. Did you notice that little bit about the prophet?

[26 : 39] You know, Abraham's a prophet. You go to him. That's weird. I mean, Abimelech's talking to the Lord in his dream. Why doesn't the Lord just say, well, give his wife back and I'll heal you.

He says, no, give his wife back and then go to Abraham for he is a prophet and he will pray for you. Then you'll be healed. Why does he do it that way?

Yes, it's partly, I think, to kind of lift Abraham up in relation to Abimelech. But as I got thinking about it, the normal way that God speaks to people at least through this time is through his appointed man, through his prophet, which makes what he did for Abimelech all the more special.

He went out of the ordinary way and appeared to the guy who was not chosen in a dream and warned him. A gift of grace. I don't want you to be guilty for the sin of this guy.

I've made a promise to this guy to protect him, which you're going to be in trouble because of that, but I don't want you to be guilty for something that you didn't even realize you were stepping into.

[27 : 59] Even that, a surprising, unexpected gift of grace to this king that's not even, he's not even the chosen guy. This is the kind of God that we serve.

The Lord is gracious and compassionate. And I want to end this morning with a reminder from Paul in his letter to the Romans, Roman church, that makes this clear.

Just like Abraham, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. but we all may be justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

And it doesn't seem fair, does it? It doesn't seem right. But that's the point of this. God sees the world in its brokenness, in its sin, in its rebellion against him.

he's not waiting around for the world to get its act together, to become good enough. He steps in.

[29 : 27] He intervenes. He gives a gift of grace. He sets his favor upon his people. Period. And Christ is the ultimate example of that.

A little later in Romans, Paul says this, at just the right time when we were still powerless, we couldn't do it. We couldn't be good enough.

We couldn't earn our way into his favor. At just the right time when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person.

Though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die, but God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

An unexpected gift. An undeserved gift. The Lord is gracious and compassionate. Slow to anger and rich in love.

[30 : 35] Let's pray. Amen. Father, as we read this old story of Abraham, we are kind of surprised.

Oftentimes, we think that we have to be good to receive good from you, to get your blessing. But we thank you that it's not the way it works.

We thank you that you have come to us with a gift. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for his blood which has made us right with you, which has put us into this amazing connection with Jesus so that we have become heirs to with Abraham.

Not just of some promises, but of all your promises. Jesus, you are amazing, Lord. And we give you glory. We give you praise.

In Christ's name, Amen.